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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, SA/RA, DRL/IRF, DRL/CRA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [KSEP](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: Maldives: Draft International Religious Freedom Report for 2004

Refs: (A) Colombo-DRL 05-07-04 unclass email
- (B) State 82752

1. (U) This message is Sensitive But Unclassified --
Please handle accordingly.

2. (U) Per Ref B, Mission submits below the draft Maldives International Religious Freedom report for 2004. A Word document with tracked changes in the final 2003 version of the Maldives report has been sent to the Department via email (per Ref B instructions).

3. (SBU) Draft Maldives International Religious Freedom Report for 2004:

Begin Text:

The 1997 Constitution designates the Sunni branch of Islam as the official state religion, and the Government interprets this provision to impose a requirement that citizens must be Muslims. The practice of any religion other than Islam is prohibited by law. Non-Muslim foreigners are allowed to practice their religion if they do so in private and do not encourage citizens to participate. The President is the "supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam." The Government observes Shari'a (Islamic law).

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and freedom of religion remains severely restricted.

Many citizens regard Islam as one of their society's most distinctive characteristics and believe that it promotes harmony and national identity.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The Maldives is an archipelago consisting of approximately 1,200 coral atolls and islands scattered over 500 miles in the Indian Ocean southeast from India, and its population is approximately 280,000.

It is believed that the entire indigenous population is Muslim, the vast majority of which adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam. Non-Muslim foreigners in the Maldives, including more than 500,000 tourists annually (predominantly Europeans and Japanese) and approximately 31,000 foreign workers (predominantly Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Indians, and Bangladeshis) are allowed to practice their religion only in private.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Freedom of religion is restricted significantly. The 1997 Constitution designates Islam as the official state religion, and the Government interprets this provision to impose a requirement that citizens be Muslims. Muslim holidays are generally national holidays. Foreign residents are allowed to practice their religion if they do so privately, and cannot encourage Maldivian citizens to participate.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In July 2000, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom stated that no religion other than Islam would be allowed in the country, and the Home Affairs Ministry announced special programs to safeguard and strengthen religious unity. The Government has established a Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs to provide guidance on religious matters. The Government also has set standards for individuals who conduct Friday services at mosques to ensure adequate theological qualifications.

The President must be a Sunni Muslim and under the Constitution is the "supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam." Cabinet ministers also are required to be Sunni Muslims. Members of the People's Majlis (Parliament) must be Muslim.

The Government observes Shari'a. Civil law is subordinate to Shari'a, which is applied in situations not covered by civil law as well as in certain acts such as divorce and adultery. Under the country's Islamic practice, the testimony of two women is required to equal that of one man in matters involving Shari'a, such as adultery, finance, and inheritance. In other cases, the testimony of men and women are equal. Shari'a also governs intestate inheritance, granting male heirs twice the share of female heirs. The Constitution provides that an accused person has the right to defend himself "in accordance with Shari'a." The Government only registers clubs and other private associations that do not contravene Islamic or civil law.

The law prohibits public statements that are contrary to Islam.

There are no places of worship for adherents of other religions. The Government prohibits the importation of icons and religious statues but generally permits the importation of religious tracts, such as Bibles, for personal use. The sale of religious items, such as Christmas cards, is restricted to only the resort islands patronized by foreign tourists.

The Government prohibits non-Muslim clergy and missionaries from proselytizing and conducting public worship services. Conversion of a Muslim to another faith is a violation of Shari'a and may result in a loss of the convert's citizenship.

Islamic instruction is a mandatory part of the school curriculum, and the Government funds the salaries of instructors of Islam.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The law limits a citizen's right to freedom of expression in order to protect "the basic tenets of Islam." According to Amnesty International and other sources, in early 2002, four individuals were arrested for distributing Islamist and anti-government literature. On July 7, 2002, after being convicted of the charges, three of the defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment and the fourth was given a ten-year sentence.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners during the period covered by this report.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Persecution by Terrorist Organizations

There are no known terrorist organizations, as designated by the Secretary of State under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, operating in the Maldives.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Most citizens regard Islam as one of their society's most distinctive characteristics and believe that it promotes harmony and national identity and helps remove any desire for different groups to break away from the state. The President regularly encourages all Maldivians to strengthen their religious unity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government does not maintain a resident embassy in the Maldives; the U.S. Ambassador in Colombo, Sri Lanka, also is accredited to the Government in Male. The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Prisoner Lists and Issue Briefs

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners during the period covered by this report.
End Text.

